

The Boston Globe

PUSHING TO KEEP THE US COMPETITIVE

February 04, 2006 Saturday

BY NINA J. EASTON, GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON Democratic Senator John F. Kerry had his Sputnik moment during the 2004 presidential campaign. "We weren't competing hard enough," he said as he recalled standing in a field in October 1957 and watching the world's first man-made spacecraft built by America's archrival the Soviet Union streak across the night sky.

Republican Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts offered up the Sputnik lesson in testimony before a US House committee last spring, arguing that "our generation hasn't had its Sputnik moment yet. I am convinced it will." And while President Bush didn't mention Sputnik in his State of the Union speech proposing an American **Competitiveness** Initiative, his plan's supporters understood that that's what he meant.

For years, academics, scientists, engineers, and others have been sounding the alarm: The United States is on a course toward losing its scientific edge to nations like India and China, threatening standards of living that Americans have long taken for granted. Now politicians of both parties are taking up the call to expand education opportunities and research funding, offering a rare point of agreement in an otherwise poisonous partisan atmosphere.

But the prospect of congressional action, political strategists say, is hobbled by tight budgets, an election-year resistance to letting the opposing party claim credit for popular policies, and a president with a reputation even among some Republican lawmakers for offering dazzling rhetoric on domestic initiatives without follow-through leadership on Capitol Hill.

"Democrats frankly would agree with him," said Steven C. Clemons, who directs the American strategy program at the New America Foundation. "The issue is who's real about it and who's not."

Both sides agree on the problem: The locus of innovation and technology is shifting away from US shores. Fewer American students are pursuing math and science degrees. In 2004, China graduated about half a million engineers, India 200,000, and America only 70,000, according to the National Academies report that underpinned Bush's proposals. The US ranks alongside Kyrgyzstan in the percentage of 24-year-olds holding degrees in natural sciences or engineering. The United States has lost its lead in patents and today is a net importer of high technology.

Pollsters say the issue shows up indirectly in opinion surveys: Despite a relatively low unemployment rate, large majorities of people especially college graduates say that "good jobs" are hard to find in their communities.

"This is the kind of domestic initiative that's pretty easily marketable," said Carroll Doherty, associate director of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The initiative might also help Bush bump his approval ratings on education, where he has suffered because of disgruntlement over the No Child Left Behind law, Doherty noted.

By talking about his \$136 billion, 10-year proposal to increase basic research funding, expand the research-and-development tax credit, fund teacher-training programs, and the like, Bush and other political leaders can skip more contentious debates over American job loss such as trade and immigration policy, analysts note.

After Bush's State of the Union speech, a staunchly liberal, labor-supported Democrat Senator Barbara Mikulski of Maryland declared that she was "ready to work with President Bush." Improving US **competitiveness** has been a running theme for Mikulski, one of the primary sponsors of a package of three bills to add billions of dollars in new funding to federal science and education programs. That initiative, which was also sponsored by Republican Senator Pete Domenici and Democratic Senator Jeff Bingaman, both of New Mexico, has drawn broad bipartisan support.

In a telling moment last week, Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid's war-room, which churns out daily partisan attacks on Republican foes, did not single out Bush's **competitiveness** initiative for condemnation after the speech.

In an interview later, however, Reid spokesman Jim Manley dismissed Bush's proposals as largely "small bore. . . . They provide powerful symbols, but there's no comprehensive policy initiatives."

The sudden emergence of the issue onto the presidential agenda was a result of a confluence of events: A National Academies report last fall that garnered widespread interest on Capitol Hill, a series of December meetings between the authors and administration officials, and Bush's need to offer a big idea in his State of the Union that did not risk alarming large swathes of voters, as his Social Security plan did last year.

Over the past two years, a range of industry groups have churned out reports with names like "Losing the Competitive Edge" and "Technology Industry at an Innovation Crossroads," all without much fanfare. But the National Academies study commissioned by Congress, "Rising Above the Gathering Storm," prompted congressional hearings, largely because of the prominence of its authors, led by retired Lockheed Martin chairman Norman Augustine.

"I said, 'Norm, your report is music to my ears,' " recalled House Science Committee chairman Sherwood L. **Boehlert**, a moderate New York Republican who has been

pressing the issue for years. "It used to be that high-tech issues were just for geeks and nerds. Now we can point out [to voters] that these policies are designed to make your lives better and more affordable."

After the release of the report, a summit between cabinet secretaries and the report's authors was convened in December at the Department of Commerce. That morning, over a breakfast of omelettes, **Boehlert** pressed Office of Management and Budget director Joshua B. Bolten to take up the cause.

"He listened attentively, but was worried about where the money was going to come from," **Boehlert** said. "My flip answer was to say 'Take a look at that funny shaped building across the river,' " a reference to the Pentagon. "But then I said, 'We've got to establish some priorities.'"

Augustine and other authors also met with Bolten and Bush's top strategist, Karl Rove. Four weeks later, Chief of Staff Andrew Card gave a speech drawing on the themes of the report.

On the afternoon of the State of the Union, **Boehlert** received calls from administration officials, all assuring him he would be pleased at what the president had to say. He was, but after toiling in the dark on the issue for years, **Boehlert** remains skeptical.

"He was eloquent in words," **Boehlert** said of Bush and his speech. "But that's not enough. You need actions."